

## El Pulguero

Do you remember an Inn,  
 Miranda?  
 Do you remember an Inn?  
 And the tedding and the spreading  
 Of the straw for a bedding,  
 And the fleas that tease in the High Pyrenees,  
 And the wine that tasted of tar?

Hilaire Beloc, 'Tarantella', 1929

On return to the laboratory in Seville, after just few days away on field work, I would usually be greeted with 'Hey, bloody Aussie. Are you back so soon?' as Ramon mimicked Australian banter. Otherwise it would be some prank from Manolo Carrion, the laboratory technician.

On one such occasion, settling down to write a letter immediately after a long car trip back from Almería, the Spanish-configured key-board seemed even more insurmountable than usual and progress was unusually slow. The special keys for grave and acute accents or characters such as ñ seemed to be constantly in the way as I struggled to write in English. Then suddenly, sensing an unexpected quietness, I turned to find out what was wrong. My gaze was met by Manolo, hunched over an enormous red fire-extinguisher aimed in my general direction. Feigning great earnestness, he exclaimed: 'Brian, I am so worried your rapid typing might set fire to the keyboard!'

On another occasion I was explaining to Manolo how and why I took soil temperatures in the immediate vicinity of rabbit warrens. It was important to record the conditions in rabbit burrows in Spain where the fleas lived and make comparisons with those their descendants might encounter if released in inland Australia. 'It was really quite simple,' I said. 'I use a hammer to drive a length of aluminium or copper tube down into the soil and then progressively lower a temperature recording probe to 10, 50 and 100 centimetres or so to read the temperature.'

Unfortunately, instead of using the word 'matilla' for hammer, I had inadvertently said 'maleta'. It had sounded about right at the time – something like mallet – but Manolo's eyes took on that wicked glint once again and he put his arm over my shoulders as though to comfort someone of feeble mind. 'Una maleta, eh? Una maleta ...' he repeated as it suddenly dawned on me what I had said. *Maleta* meant suitcase – not hammer! But it was already too late – Manolo was off, skipping around the office to laughingly share the joke with all who would listen. It didn't stop there. From time to time throughout the morning I could hear him breaking into giggles which built into fits of uncontrolled laughter as his mind filled with a picture of me, in the wilds of Andalucía, swinging a huge suitcase to drive metal tubes into the soil. All this in the cause of investigating the wily rabbit flea!